

Senegal and Rwanda: A Long-term Friendship and Promising Métissage

Senegalese President Macky Sall's recent meeting in Germany with President Paul Kagame is an exciting feat. Senegal and Rwanda are looking to work together towards entirely self-sufficient African manufacturing of vaccines. As my two parent countries, Rwanda and Senegal have always held a special place in my heart, even more so now in my slightly more informed adulthood.

At first glance, Rwanda and Senegal's cultures and governance styles are drastically opposed. While Senegal's democracy is rarely questioned by western (read French) media, Rwanda's is negated profusely, regardless of how frequently Rwandans express their satisfaction with their leadership. But in both cases, the west is under the misconception that it gets to define our respective situations in any way they prefer. And again, in both cases, the "natives" and their leaders are proving them wrong through their Pan-African political strides and dedication to nurturing historical ties and a culture unmarred by neo-colonial efforts.

When Enough Is Enough

My earliest memory of Macky Sall's unapologetic governance style is his response to then President Barack Obama's overt lecturing of the Senegalese people on our attitudes to human rights. In a 2013 visit to Dakar, Barack Obama urged Senegalese people, and specifically our President, to reconsider the criminalization of homosexuality. He claimed that all states had a responsibility to "treat everyone equally," a statement that implied that the US knows this fact explicitly and that the country is ruled accordingly. The

suggestion that the US “treats everyone equally” is naturally false, and there lies the offensiveness of the statement.

I believe in the equality of individuals regardless of their gender, sexuality, race or religion. However, there is something quite patronizing about suggesting that the United States is ideally placed to give Africans lessons on morality and the respect for human rights. This is a country that consistently passes into law the discrimination of people based on race, gender, sexuality and income, overtly applies voter suppression and puts children in cages based on the choices of their parents. Such a country does not—and should not—have the moral *locus standi* to pontificate to Africans about human rights. Macky Sall seemed to think so too, for his response to Obama likely snapped Obama back into reality. “It’s like the death penalty,” Sall responded and continued regarding the practice in the United States: “[This is] a question that every country tackles in their own way. We have abolished it a long time ago. [But] we respect the choices of every state.”

The execution of individuals found guilty of certain crimes is still legal in the self-styled ‘land of the free’. Between 1973 and now, about 185 Americans that received the death sentence were eventually found to be innocent. As one can expect, the majority of them were people of colour. A country that defends the execution of black people, either through the exoneration of charges against murderous policemen or the protection of the death sentence, attempting to teach Senegalese people about equality for all, is very familiar to the average Rwandan.

This hypocrisy is indicative of the fact that the western ruler believes that we are neither intellectually capable of discerning evident truths nor worthy of their honesty. I suspect the latter to be an internal problem; the westerner in their classist core tends to believe that those they surpass in financial and social power are their intellectual

inferiors, and therefore easy prey to their manipulations.

President Paul Kagame is consistently criticized by purposely uninformed and willfully ignorant journalists about democracy in Rwanda. Kagame rightfully stated in 2011 that institutions like the UN did not have “the moral right” to criticize him – a statement which had several western journalists, including one Ian Birell, clenching their fists in fury. With his other hand, Birell called Kagame “despotic and deluded” on Twitter. I find this deeply ironic.

The real delusion here is the one the western world displays when it positions itself as entitled to define who is worthy of criticism and who ought to be praised (typically based on the subject’s level of subservience to the West). Afterwards, the West turns to the very people it has relentlessly oppressed, killed and robbed, to force-feed them lessons on human rights. This act will never stop flabbergasting me.

[“I cannot live by or live the imperfections of the West,”](#) President Kagame stated in a CNN interview with Richard Quest last year. “Democracy is not defined by the West,” he went on. Indeed, the delusions of the west regarding their pathological hypocrisy, and the supposedly democratic standard of countries that drafts complex laws to stop people of colour from voting, are their own problems. These delusions are neither Rwanda’s nor Senegal’s to tend to, humour, or appease.

A Friendship of the Past, Present and Future

Senegal and Rwanda are not just united in their rejection of the western teacher. They also share a friendship that, in 1994, saw the life-saving potential of Pan-Africanism. In Rwanda, there is rarely any mention of Senegal that is not followed up with the name “Mbaye Diagne”. Capitaine Mbaye Diagne was a United Nations military observer who served in Rwanda from 1993 to 1994. He devised several missions, on his own initiative, to attempt to save Tutsi civilians from

murderous genocidaires during the Genocide Against the Tutsi. He was killed during one of these missions; however, the valor in the choices that resulted in his death is incontestable.

This story brings me to the connection between Rwandan and Senegalese cultures, which is hard to quantify – or even prove. However, to those that know both nations, it is undeniable. Courage and, in some ways, dignity are at the core of Rwandan and Senegalese cultures. In Senegal, courage expresses itself in the fact that people on the street will run to the rescue of any person/stranger being assaulted or denied justice, irrespective of the risks. In Rwanda, this same spirit manifests in the determination to overcome the unimaginable, not because the pain has been alleviated, but out of the belief that Rwanda, and Rwandans, deserve a brighter future.

Governing with regard

When it comes to President Kagame's governance, allusions to dictatorship have been made plenty of times; yet even those that chronically do so insist that the country's socioeconomic trajectory is nothing short of impressive. This raises the question of why a "dictator", ill-bent on governing regardless of, and against the will of his population, would be so preoccupied with improving the lives of those he supposedly oppresses.

I have seen improvements in Senegal under President Macky Sall: the completion of age-long projects like the new airport, the decentralization of Dakar (the Senegalese capital), the development of new conference and touristic infrastructure outside of the city, the construction of over 221 km of roads (including a highway that has facilitated access to the entire country and our immediate neighbours) and of two new ports, to further render Senegal a regional trade hub for Europe and the Americas. I have also witnessed the ugliness of foreign media deodorizing the crimes of a

political opponent whose offerings for the country are nothing short of frightening (religious fundamentalism, for one). The familiarity of this occurrence to the average Rwandan is obvious. However, both in Rwanda and Senegal, I have been pleased to witness our leaders remain focused on our development and refuse the western gaze the right to define our realities, our identities and our agency. From the regard President Sall's and President Kagame's governments have shown for their people's aspirations, it is my sincere belief that if and when their people no longer want his leadership, they will step down.

It's unfortunate that the meeting of my two presidents, reminiscent of the long friendship between both Rwanda and Senegal, came at a time of major economic and human ravages from the Covid-19 pandemic. But it also comes in the context of new threat of dependency on the flaky western charity, which we must surmount. This is Pan-Africanism in action. Both Senegal and Rwanda, through this partnership and the years of friendship that have culminated into it, are bearing testimony to the fact that the good health and welfare of Africans are at the core of an Africa that wishes to develop itself independently and authentically.